

The Mainstream Right and Family Policy Agendas in the Post-Fordist Age

BEYOND FAMILIALISM?

Giovanni Amerigo Giuliani

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The Mainstream Right and Family Policy Agendas in the Post-Fordist Age: Beyond Familialism?

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Michele

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About the Author

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Introduction

1. Rationale of the Book

1.1 The “Incomplete” Revolution

There is great consensus within the comparative literature that in the post-Fordist era, family and family arrangements have undergone a *revolution* (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2009; Lewis, 2009). All the Western advanced economies have indeed increasingly experienced a massive transformation of the traditional household (Leira & Saraceno, 2008). Such a paradigmatic change includes the decline of marriage rates and the parallel emergence of new forms of cohabitation; a dramatic drop in fertility and birth rates, as well as a higher percentage of children born outside the marriage; a rise in the numbers of divorces and separations and consequently a wide spread of lone parenthood; a massive influx of women in the labor markets and new claims for a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid tasks; the legalization of same-sex marriage or union and the legitimization of same-sex parenting (e.g., Kotowska, 2012; Ostner & Schmitt, 2008; Saraceno, 2022).

In such a dynamic scenario, the traditional *male breadwinner family model* – with its strict gendered specialization of the roles within the household – has been increasingly questioned (Lewis, 2001, 2009). Accordingly, family policy has started to change (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2018a; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015; Saraceno, 2017; Saraceno et al., 2012). *Familistic* policy programs aiming to bolster families in their caring function have been accompanied, and sometimes partially replaced, by the expansion of *de-familializing* measures in order to unburden families – and especially women – from caring tasks (Korpi, 2000; Leitner, 2003; Saraceno, 2010a, 2010b; Saraceno & Keck, 2011). Since the end of the Fordist age, childcare and leave – including that designated for fathers – have been introduced and expanded (e.g., Moss, 2018; Pfau-Effinger, 2006; Rostgaard, 2018; Thévenon, 2018).

In other words, from the 1970s onwards – and more palpably since the 1990s – there has been a gradual but constant departure from the male breadwinner family model and from a pure, *familistic* policy agenda. As a consequence, the *dual-earner family model* – with both parents in paid jobs – has started to spread (Crompton, 2006; Korpi, 2000; Lewis, 2001).

2 *The Mainstream Right and Family Policy Agendas*

However, such a revolution remains incomplete (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Female labor market participation varies substantially, with Scandinavian countries displaying the highest rates and the Mediterranean – especially Italy and Greece – the lowest. The dual-earner family model is not predominant in all the countries observed, and in several national contexts, a *one-and-half earner model* emerges, with women in part-time employment (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Furthermore, female ingress in the labor force has not been matched by a corresponding growth in men's share of unpaid work in the household (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). The *earner/carer family model* – where both the mothers and fathers *work and care* – is far from being rooted in the Western societies (Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014; Ciccia & Verloo, 2012).

Accordingly, no perfect convergence has come to light in family policy, while distinctive cross-country patterns may be noted. In other words, the advanced economies in the post-Fordist era still differentiate with reference to the “setting” of the family policy instruments (i.e., cash transfers, early childhood care and education (ECEC), flexible working arrangements, and leave) introduced over time (e.g., Daly & Rake, 2003; Daly, 2005; Ferragina, 2019). Different typologies based on *family profiles* may thus still be identified (e.g., Fraser, 1997; Korpi, 2000; Lewis, 1992, 2009; Misra et al., 2007, 2011; Sainsbury, 1996).

1.2 *The Multifaceted Nature of the Family Policy*

In the last few decades, this *still incomplete* family revolution has triggered increasingly extensive research within the comparative welfare state literature, with a significant amount of works investigating the diverse patterns of family policy reforms – across countries and over time – as well as their different drivers (e.g., Blome, 2017; Clasen, 2011; Daly, 1997, 2000; Daly & Ferragina, 2017; Ellingsæter, 2003; Fleckenstein & Lee, 2014, 2020; Häusermann, 2018; Keck & Saraceno, 2013; León et al., 2021; Lewis, 1992, 1997; Lewis et al., 2008a, 2008b; Nygård et al., 2013, 2019; Pascall & Lewis, 2004; Saraceno, 2016; Seeleib-Kaiser & Toivonen, 2011).

In this regard, it is worth stressing that family policy is an integral part of the welfare state arrangements and can be considered as a subset or subcategory of the social policies (Ferrera, 2019).

However, contrary to other social policy fields such as pension or labor market policies, family policy has a more *multifaceted* nature (Giuliani, 2022a, 2023a; Häusermann, 2010, 2018). Like all the welfare state policies, it concerns the (re) distribution of material resources among families, in terms of money transfers (e.g., family allowances or child benefits), services (ECEC), and time to care (leave). Yet it also implies cultural preferences regarding gender relations, and especially so with regard to the role of women in society, as well as State involvement in incentivizing or disincentivizing specific gender arrangements within the household (Morgan, 2006).

Such a peculiar characterization clearly affects the *politics* of family policy. The political conflict around such a policy field is expected to be motivated not

only by *material* preferences – i.e., who gets what and to what extent – but also by *postmaterial* or *cultural* ones, that is, the specific social order that political actors want to promote. Clearly, material and postmaterial preferences are closely linked and mutually reinforced. The decision regarding which policy instruments – money transfers, childcare, leave – to expand, to what extent, and for the benefit of whom is embedded in a more general consideration regarding the family policy’s cultural goal, since the specific intermingling of assorted measures, in kind and not-in kind, produces different outcomes relating to gender equality (Giuliani, 2023a).

Therefore, the politics of family policy is more *nuanced* compared to the other welfare state policies. It follows that political actors’ policy agendas are expected to be influenced by a different and wider array of drivers.

1.3 The Politics of Family Policy and the Mainstream Right

It is not surprising that, given the multifaceted nature of this policy realm, an expanding body of comparative research has started to explore the politics of family policy (see, for example, Blome, 2017; Clasen, 2011; Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaseir, 2015; León & Pavolini, 2014; León et al., 2021; Morgan, 2006).

However, for several years, attention has mostly focused on the role of the Mainstream Left parties – that is, the social democrats – as the core promoter of family policy across the advanced democracies, especially in Western Europe. Such a “research bias” is theoretically linked with the power resource theory (PRT), according to which the expansion of the welfare state is largely attributable to the power of the Left-wing parties and labor unions (Esping-Andersen, 1985; Korpi, 1978, 1983).

Consequently, the welfare state preferences of the Mainstream Right, i.e., Christian democratic and conservative parties – including those regarding the family policy – have been overlooked.

Mainstream Right parties are generally depicted by the party politics literature as welfare state *antagonists*, which promote an economic program based on *laissez-faire* and limited involvement of the state in the social sector, thus supporting retrenchment of the welfare state.

In this regard, comparative welfare state research has provided a more thorough analysis. During the Fordist age, Christian democratic parties were social policy *promoters* and not antagonists, especially in the continental countries – despite them not backing a universalistic welfare state like the social democrats, in particular, in the Nordic countries (Kalyvas & van Kersbergen, 2010; van Kersbergen, 1995). Similarly, the conservatives for the most part *consented* the establishment and, in certain occasions, even *contributed* to the consolidation of the main social programs (Cowen, 2010; Parry, 1986), while retrenchment positions began to receive support from the 1980s onwards, in parallel with the spread of the neoliberal paradigm (Kremer, 2007; Lister, 1989).

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When it comes to family policy, the Mainstream Right has been usually associated with *familialism* – mostly due to its traditionalist ideology in terms of gender arrangements – and thus has long been considered to champion the male breadwinner model (e.g., Blome, 2017; Leitner, 2010; Palier, 2010; van Kerbergen, 1995). Nevertheless, its family policy is still insufficiently explored and whether it has modified in the post-Fordist age remains an empirical question.

The scarce attention paid to the Mainstream Right's family policy agenda is questionable, at least for two reasons.

First, as shown in [Table 1](#), Christian democratic and conservative parties have continued to be key political actors in Western Europe in the last 30 years. In terms of electoral results, in a context of general support decline for the Mainstream parties, they have been much more successful in limiting losses compared to the parties of the Mainstream Left, and in several national contexts – first of all, the Nordic countries – they have even increased their consensus. Furthermore, in various countries, they have been in office for a considerable number of years, thus having the chance to propose and implement their policy agendas, including those regarding the family.

Second, the transformations of the economic, social, and demographic structures of the Western democracies have not impacted only the social democratic parties – as largely investigated by the comparative literature. Indeed, even Christian democrats and conservatives have been increasingly under pressure to change their social preferences (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019). The family policy appears to be one key area where these parties could be further motivated to readapt their strategy, since, in the post-Fordist age, a traditionalist, pure-familistic agenda is no longer likely to be electorally rewarding.

2. Research Questions and Outline of the Argument

This book strives to answer two interlinked research questions:

- (1) How have family policy agendas of the Mainstream Right parties been configured in the post-Fordist age? Have these parties readapted their preferences over time – going beyond familialism – or have they kept their agenda unaltered?
- (2) What are the drivers that may account for the Mainstream Right's family agendas in the postindustrial era? And, how can the different configuration of such drivers explain cross-country similarities and differences? More specifically, under what conditions have the Mainstream Right parties gone beyond a pure-familistic agenda?

In further detail, the work first investigates the Mainstream Right parties' family policy agendas in the last three decades (Early 1990s – Late 2010s) by looking at (a) what kinds of *policy instruments* these parties uphold/contest and to what extent, (b) what *policy goals* they aim to achieve, and consequently (c) what *family models* are encouraging through their positions.

Table 1. Percentages of Votes for Mainstream Right and Mainstream Left Parties in National Elections (1990s–2010s) and Years in Office in the Last Three Decades, Selected Countries.^a

	% of Votes					Years in Office in the Last Three decades ^b
	1990s	2000s	2010s	Diff. 2010s–1990s	Diff. 2010–2000s	
MR_Sweden	22.4	30.1	24.4	2.0	–5.7	11.0
ML_Sweden	39.8	35.2	29.6	–10.2	–5.6	19.0
MR_Norway	15.7	17.5	25.9	10.2	8.4	13.0
ML_Norway	36.0	30.8	29.1	–6.9	–1.7	17.0
MR_Germany	35.1	35.8	37.2	2.1	1.4	23.0
ML_Germany	40.9	31.9	23.1	–17.8	–8.8	7.0
MR_France	18.5	36.5	21.4	2.9	–15.1	17.0
ML_France	22.3	25.0	18.4	–3.9	–6.6 ^c	10.0
MR_Italy	20.8	30.1	17.5	–3.3	–12.6	10.0
ML_Italy	20.7	31.7	22.2	1.5	–9.5	12.0
MR_Spain	36.9	40.9	29.0	–7.9	–11.9	14.0
ML_Spain	38.4	40.3	26.2	–12.2	–14.1	16.0
MR_United Kingdom	36.3	32.0	39.7	3.4	7.7	17.0
ML_United Kingdom	38.8	37.9	32.9	–5.9	–5.0	13.0

Source: Comparative Manifesto Project Database and WhoGov Dataset.

MR, Mainstream Right; *ML*, Mainstream Left. Sweden: Moderate Party (MR), Swedish Social Democratic Party (ML); Norway: Conservative Party + Christian Democratic Party (MR); Labor Party/Norwegian Labor Party (ML); Germany: Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union (MR); Social Democratic Party of Germany (ML); France: Rally for the Republic/Union for a Popular Movement/The Republicans (MR); Socialist Party (ML); Italy: Forza Italia/People of Freedom (MR); Left Democratic Party/Democrats of the Left + The Daisy/Democratic Party (ML); Spain: People's Party (MR); Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (ML); United Kingdom: Conservative Party (UK); Labor Party (ML).

^aValues are average vote scores respectively in 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. The selected countries are Sweden (SW), Norway (NO), Germany (GE), France (FR), Italy (IT), Spain (ES), and the United Kingdom (UK).

^bOnly the years in which the MR or ML are in office as the *leading* parties have been counted. Both in Germany and – to a lesser extent – in Italy, *Grosse Koalition* were built in the last two decades.

^cThe Socialist Party's fall is more conspicuous if the last 2010s elections are considered – the 2017 elections – where the party obtained 7.4% of the votes.

Second, it aims to explain *why*, over time, some parties have modified their preferences – moving away from a purely familistic agenda – while others have

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resisted change. The work addresses this research puzzle through a multicausal theoretical framework which considers a set of *sociocultural, institutional-contextual* and *political* drivers.

The study answers these two research questions by comparing the Mainstream Right parties from four Western European countries: the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* – Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union in Bavaria or *CDU/CSU* – (Germany), *Forza Italia* – Go Italy or *FI* – (Italy), the *Moderata Samlingspartiet* – Moderate Party or *M* – (Sweden), and the Conservative Party – or *Tories* – (United Kingdom).

Two main interlinked theoretical arguments guide this work.

In the first place, in the post-Fordist era, the political conflict around the family policy has become more *problematic* (Fig. 1). Adopting a traditional dichotomic lens of “*pro vs contra*” or “*more vs less*” when analyzing the politics of family policy risks oversimplifying reality, since the space of political conflict has become *multidimensional*, with one dimension related to *familializing* policy instruments (i.e., cash transfers) and the other to *de-familializing* ones (i.e., childcare and – short and well-paid – leave) (Beramendi et al., 2015; Garritzmann et al., 2022; Giuliani, 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a; Häusermann, 2010, 2012, 2018).

Therefore, the real question to answer is no longer *whether* the Mainstream Right supports or opposes family policy but rather *which kind* of policy

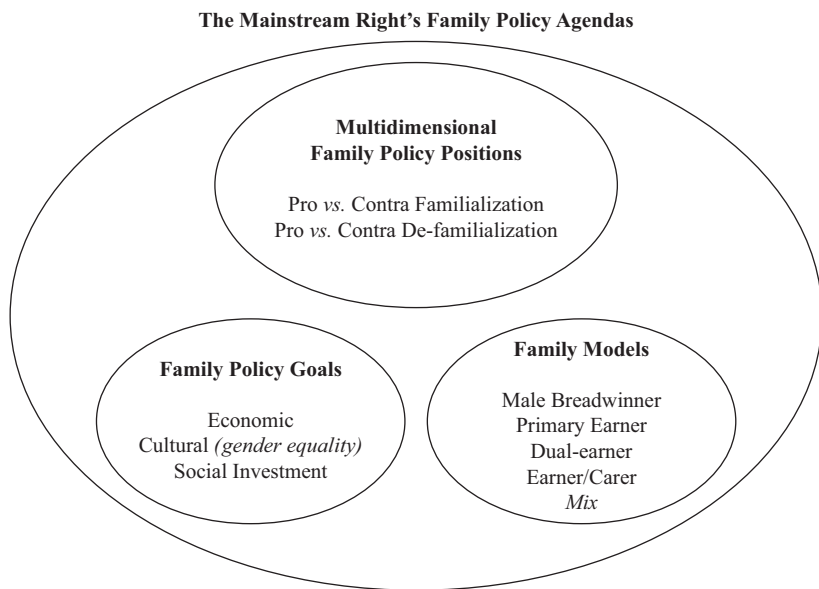


Fig. 1. Analyzing the Mainstream Right’s Family Policy Agendas.

instruments – *familializing* vs *de-familializing* ones – they want to expand and/or retrench and to what extent.

The final positions Christian democratic and conservative parties take are the results of the specific *combination* of the preferences they have adopted in the two dimensions of conflict. These preferences can either go in the same direction (i.e., expanding/retrenching both familializing and de-familializing policy instruments) or be divergent (i.e., expanding familializing instruments and retrenching de-familializing ones, or vice versa). Furthermore, these parties may adopt these positions – and even the same position – with different *policy goals* in mind: they may support/oppose familializing and de-familializing policy instruments on the grounds of *economic*, *cultural*, and *social investment* motivations. Depending on the final policy goals they intend to achieve, they facilitate establishing and/or consolidating a variegated number of family models (i.e., the male breadwinner, the primary earner, the dual-earner, the earner/carer models, or any combination of all of these).

Second, to explain alterations in, or persistence of, the Mainstream Right’s policy agendas in the post-Fordist era, a multicausal theoretical framework is required (Fig. 2). In other words, these agendas are expected to be affected by an array of macro-drivers. More specifically, three sets of interconnected, explanatory variables are identified in the book.

Sociocultural drivers refer to societal modernization and the spread of new egalitarian values concerning gender roles, as well as the changes in the social stratification that have occurred in the postindustrial age.

Institutional and contextual drivers include the policy legacies inherited from the past and the change in Western Europe’s economic and demographic structures.

Finally, *political* drivers indicate those politically oriented incentives and disincentives potentially affecting the Mainstream Right parties – that is, the degree of female representation within the institutions and the specific structure of party competition.

In the post-Fordist age, the Mainstream Right is potentially exposed to multiple, interlinked sources of pressure when formulating its family policy agendas.

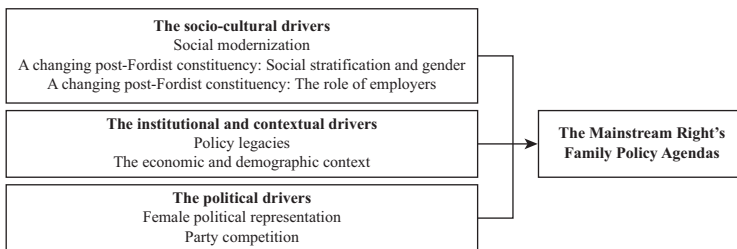


Fig. 2. The Package of Macro-Drivers Affecting the Family Policy Agendas.

Compared to the industrial age, Christian democrats and conservatives are likely to have more incentives to change their familistic agendas: they potentially are motivated to go beyond familialism, increasingly supporting de-familialization, pursuing gender equality and social investment goals, thus promoting the dual-earner or even the earner/carer family models.

However, the configuration of the macro-drivers is expected to vary substantially across the countries. In some national contexts, structural changes have produced effective incentives that already back in the 1990s – and increasingly in the 2000s and 2010s – pushed for a radical agenda change (as the empirical analysis of the Swedish case study will demonstrate). In other contexts, structural changes have occurred only recently and thus have produced a delayed, though substantial, effect but with some limitations (as the study of Germany and the United Kingdom will illustrate). In other national contexts, structural changes have occurred in a very limited way: rather than offering incentives for de-familializing, the macro-drivers have provided incentives for strengthening a familistic agenda (as will be exemplified by the scrutiny of the Italian case study).

To summarize, by looking at the specific configuration of an assortment of macro-drivers within the national contexts over time, it is possible to explain the variability of the Mainstream Right's family policy agendas.

3. Contribution of the Book

The contributions of this book are theoretical, empirical, and methodological.

From a theoretical perspective, the work primarily focuses on a rather unexplored topic. While there is a broad and well-informed comparative literature on family policy reforms, the Mainstream Right's family policy agendas have not been investigated in a systemic way. Consequently, we still know relatively little about the evolution over time of the Christian democratic and conservative parties' preferences in this specific welfare state realm, as well as differences and similarities across countries. The present research thus fills this gap in the literature and shows that in the post-Fordist era, in several Western European countries, the Mainstream Right represents a pivotal actor in family policy reforms.

Second, the work investigates the Mainstream Right's family policy agendas from a multidimensional perspective, thus complicating the analysis of the *politics*. It does so by providing a theoretical framework for exploring party positions which combines the insights of the comparative family policy literature – especially that concerning the *varieties of familialism* – with those of the Social Investment research (Armingeon & Bonoli, 2006; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2009; Fraser, 1997; Garritzmann et al., 2022; Häusermann, 2010, 2012, 2018; Hemerijck, 2013, 2017; Leitner, 2003; Lewis, 1992; Lewis & Ostner, 1994; Lister, 1994; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1994; Saraceno, 2010; Saraceno & Keck, 2010; Taylor Gooby, 2004).

As such, the book offers a more thorough examination of the political contestation around family policy, showing that the alternative positions open to political parties in the family realm are much wider and complex than general